



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

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The New Delhi-Islamabad Dialogue: No Cause for Optimism

Jagdish N. Singh

Recent statements by India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh seemed to indicate New Delhi's desire to resume its comprehensive dialogue with Islamabad, which was suspended in the wake of the Mumbai terror attacks of November 2008. Singh declared in the Indian Parliament on July 29 that "Pakistan is our neighbour. We should be good neighbours. If we live in peace, as good neighbours do...if there is cooperation between us, and not conflict, vast opportunities will open up for trade, travel and development that will create prosperity in both countries. It is...in our vital interest to make sincere efforts to live in peace with Pakistan."

Welcoming the Prime Minister's sentiments, well-meaning Indian and Western analysts have argued that New Delhi must proceed ahead in resuming the Indian-Pakistani dialogue, as Islamabad is now genuinely participating in the war on terror. They say that Islamabad has of late been increasingly tough on

jihadi elements at home, with the army having been effective in its recent operations against al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in the NorthWest Frontier Province (NWFP). Following recent discussions with American special envoy Richard Holbrooke, Islamabad has also agreed to redeploy troops along its border with Afghanistan to stop any Taliban fleeing the US operations in the Helmand province from infiltrating into its territory. In addition, it has agreed to launch a full-fledged military operation in South Waziristan targeting the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and al-Qaeda militants, along with its ongoing small-scale offensives in Swat, Buner and Dir.

However, it would not be wise for New Delhi to initiate any substantial dialogue with Islamabad merely on the basis of noble sentiments. Moreover, the logic of the well-meaning analysts has little to do with the realities on the ground. It would be premature to assume that the recent victory of the Pakistani army over the Taliban was decisive. The clout of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, an umbrella organisation of jihadi outfits headed by Waziristani warlord Beithullah Mehsud, remains massive in the region. His reported death in a recent American drone attack the other day does not necessarily change things, as a successor may well emerge. During the recent operations against them, the Taliban struck back hard against the Pakistani authorities, targeting government buildings in the eastern province of Khost and NATO supply terminals in northern Pakistan, kidnapping and killing their critics, beheading government informers and blowing up girls' schools. Even after its recent setbacks, the TTP continues to be a force to be reckoned with, and South Waziristan is still intact as its mother-region.

The TTP's clout has been demonstrated in a number of recent incidents, including deadly attacks on the Lahore-based headquarters of Pakistan's

mighty Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) on May 27 and, a day later, in Peshawar and Dera Ismail Khan, targeting police personnel and civilians. The TTP has already claimed responsibility for the Lahore bombing with the help of the Punjab-based Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, long an established ally of al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Sustaining the current operations against the Islamists in general and the Taliban in particular may not be tenable for any Pakistani leadership beyond a certain point. Its defence forces have always been sympathetic to obscurantist communal elements. It is well documented that the ISI has not only supplied arms and ammunition to these groups but also shared with them what they call a common strategy to combat the enemies of Islam. General Zia-ul Haq was instrumental in having many madrasas opened along the Pakistani-Afghani border to manufacture jihadis to fight the Soviet Union during the nineteen-eighties. He also encouraged his army to recruit elements with Islamist convictions. In the process, there emerged a powerful linkage between the army and the Islamists. So powerful is this link today that even former President and General Pervez Musharraf could do little to dismantle it. It is believed that in the wake of 9/11, his army did not back his plans to launch any serious campaigns against the main Taliban-allied groups active in Pakistan, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani.

Given this background, it would be unwise to rule out the possibility of the current leadership in Islamabad altering its course and tilting towards the Taliban in the future. There are already reports that Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has not been inclined to any serious military operations against the Taliban in Waziristan or any other part of the restive tribal belt in the NWFP.

In demonstrating his sympathies to Islamist forces, Gilan's role models are former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. It may be recalled that in 1996, Bhutto ordered the rehabilitation of Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani-Afghani border area. Sharif repeatedly evaded subsequent US pressure to allow its special forces to mount an operation from Pakistani territory into Kandahar to kill or capture bin Laden.

Of uppermost concern to New Delhi is Islamabad's approach towards India-specific terrorism. Following the Mumbai attacks, the United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on the Lakshar-e-Taiba and its front organisations, including the Jamaat-ud-Dawa. It also imposed sanctions on four individuals connected with the organisation, including Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi.

Subsequently, India handed over to Pakistan all the details relating to the links between the elements behind the Mumbai attack and their masterminds based in Pakistan. But there has been no change of heart in the Pakistani Army and Inter-Service Intelligence as far as the struggle against India is concerned.

That Islamabad has launched proceedings against five men, including Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, LeT operations commander, and Zarar Shah, an LeT cadre described as a communications expert, for their involvement in the Mumbai attacks should not confuse one as to its real intentions. The Pakistani government has in fact taken evasive action regarding the prosecution of terrorists. Sometimes, its public prosecutors would not be present in the courts and while on other occasions they would not produce any concrete evidence against terrorists so that they were able to go scot-free. As a result, for example, the Lahore High Court (June 2) quashed the detention of chief of the Jamaat-ud-Dawa Hafiz Saeed and his associate Colonel (ret.) Nazeer Ahmed, blamed

for the November 2008 Mumbai attacks and other strikes against India.

In fact, Islamabad's traditional support for jihad against secular India has gone unabated. According to knowledgeable sources, over 4,000 militants have recently infiltrated into the Kashmir valley. Another 3000 are being trained in camps at Muridke in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir with the aim of fighting Indian security personnel in Jammu and Kashmir. Inside these Lashkar-e-Taiba camps today, teenage boys listen to lectures glorifying jihad for Jammu and Kashmir. Like his predecessors, Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani has openly extended moral, diplomatic and political support to the jihadis.

In the wake of last November's terrorist attacks in Mumbai, New Delhi suspended the dialogue process and placed its armed forces on high alert. New Delhi may have to continue this policy and take appropriately stringent measures at home and along its border in order to effectively combat the jihadis. The dialogue with Islamabad would best be limited to the foreign ministry level, to be capped by a meeting between the two Foreign Ministers on the sidelines of the upcoming United Nations General Assembly fall session. Leading Indian officials are now expressing skepticism regarding the Pakistani government's intentions, marking a recognition that Pakistani realities do not easily square with the Indian Prime Minister's noble intentions for a dialogue.

The author, a Visiting Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center in 2008, is a Senior Indian Journalist <<http://www/powerpolitics.in>>.

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